

Air Force Intelligence Dining Out -- 12 September 1986

The US-Soviet Conflict: A Historical Perspective

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Air Force Intelligence and US intelligence overall have come a long way back from the mid to late 1960s and the 1970s, when our resources were cut to the bone. I served in Air Force intelligence at a time when, because of the need to support our effort in Vietnam, other US military programs were deeply hurt and often crippled. Indeed, some of my most vivid memories of serving in Plans and Intelligence at Whiteman are of stealing light bulbs from other components because there weren't enough to go around; of buying office supplies -- including maps -- with our personal funds; of equipment that we could not afford to repair; and of personnel shortages so dramatic that I, as a green second lieutenant with three months commissioned service, was the entire intelligence component. Who could have imagined such conditions in the Strategic Air Command? But the neglect of our nation's strategic capabilities ranged from the absurd -- the lack of office supplies for the 351st's plans and intelligence staff -- to the tragic: our nation's failure to understand and respond to the massive military buildup of our principal adversary -- the Soviet Union.

Now, nineteen years later and five years into the restoration and further development of our defense and intelligence capabilities, we see the nation beginning once again to weary of the burden, to question the value and importance of our defense efforts. We see too many opinion leaders proclaiming that Moscow's economic problems will rein in Soviet military activities, programs and ambitions.

Amid our competing priorities and foreign policy debates, I believe there is a danger, especially among government officials, the media, and the well informed -- the three, by the way, are not always synonymous -- of losing perspective on the true nature of the strategic competition.

Discussion in the United States of the Soviet challenge for too many years has focused on a very narrow aspect of the competition -- weapons programs and military capabilities, technological advances and debates about both countries' military spending. But I would submit that this approach, while necessary, by itself has limited our national attention too much to a debate about numbers and budgets and too little to why we are engaged in this confrontation in the first place, the real nature of that contest, and its historical context.

Our fixation on numbers and on trying to cut defense is certainly not new. At the Constitutional Convention, a

proposal was made to restrict the Army to 5000 men. George Washington nudged a companion and loudly whispered he would support the measure if it were amended to provide that "no foreign army should invade the United States at any time with more than 3000 troops". I do not believe the Soviet Union would today agree to the kind of American proportional advantage sought by General Washington over a foreign adversary.

The numbers too often have crowded out history and meaning, and our citizens and perhaps too many here in Washington question the cost and risk of the competition because they often do not understand the nature of the contest itself. Indeed, only two weeks ago, Washington Post columnist Hobart Rowen argued that to stop the decline of American global economic power, "we must ... stop pouring the nation's wealth down a military drain. We must find ways of achieving arms control and detente with the Soviet Union, and then regain the means to finance a revitalization of our own economy and that of the Third World." Such a perspective on the US-Soviet contest, and it is a widely shared perspective, is tragically short-sighted, over-simplified and deeply troubling.

My twenty years in intelligence, during which I had countless opportunities to observe first-hand the work of various elements of our government, have convinced me that Washington is a city with historical amnesia. Too many decisions have been made -- especially in the 1970s -- without

knowledge of the relevant history and thus without perspective and context. I am therefore a strong believer that US intelligence, in addition to providing current information and facts, must also assume responsibility for providing that perspective. Because no one else can or will, all of us in intelligence must, whenever appropriate, couch our assessments and our forecasts in a broader historical context. Indeed, I believe that when US intelligence itself has gone astray it has often been because we too forgot the history and forgot the context. And so, I would like to offer in the next ten minutes a view of the US-Soviet conflict, a historical perspective, that I believe is too rarely considered.

First, to the nature of the conflict. Some would have you believe that this competition is yet another episode of greater power rivalry growing out of nationalisms rooted in the last century; that it derives from a search for security or to overcome a national sense of inferiority; or a quest for markets or spheres of influence, or a host of other traditional modern European State objectives. More recently, you will have heard that it is based in misunderstandings or failure at Yalta or the hobgoblin fantasies of military industrial complexes on both sides; that the rivalry is based on old fashioned thinking, an out-dated cold war mentality, an exaggerated suspicion of the other side's intentions, and just plain misunderstanding and distrust of one another.

This overintellectualized analysis reminds me of the time Mickey Spillane attended a literary conference and heard a scholar deliver a detailed paper, drawing profound conclusions from the drinking habits of literary characters. In response, Spillane shouted out that "Mike Hammer drinks beer and not cognac because I can't spell cognac." Sometimes there is a simple, straightforward explanation for things.

So it is with the Soviet challenge to America. I believe that the proponents of the strained explanations I have mentioned of the origin of the US-Soviet conflict all overlook a single simple proposition: the US-Soviet struggle is, in fact, deeply rooted in ideas and that the ideas and the conflict are as old as recorded history. The threat posed by the Soviet Union -- by Russia -- is the lineal descendent of the same threat Western civilizations have faced for three and a half thousand years: it is the threat posed by despotism and despotic ideologies against the more or less steadily developing concept that the highest goal of the State is to protect and foster the creative capabilities and the liberties of the individual. The contest between the United States and the Soviet Union is, in my view, only the latest chapter in the age-old conflict that pitted the Athenians against Xerxes and the Persians; the Romans against Attila and the Huns; Medieval Europe against Genghis Khan and the Mongol horde; and the Holy Roman Empire against Suleiman and the Ottomans. It is the contest between two elemental and historically opposed ideas of

the relationship between the individual and the State. The ideas are irreconcilable.

The threat from the Soviet Union today is rooted in both a totalitarian Marxist-Leninist ideology and in an ancient culture and civilization fundamentally different from our own -- despite the best efforts of some observers and to persuade us that the Russian leaders must think as we do and inwardly share the same spiritual values because they wear London-made suits, like jazz, American cigarettes and fast cars, and are personable and intelligent.

Lincoln once asked his cabinet, "how many legs would a dog have if you called the tail a leg." They responded, "five." He said, "no, only four. Calling a tail a leg don't make it so." Hoping that Russia or the Soviet Union shares our values and objectives doesn't make it so.

The Soviet state and the threat it poses are products of a unique interaction of history and ideologies ancient and modern. I believe it is vital to our citizens' understanding of the challenge we face to appreciate just how different Russia -- the Soviet Union -- is from us, to understand how different is their history, culture, and outlook. This is an approach unwelcome to some who see in it American ethnocentrism or narrow-minded prejudice of some sort. But, ironically, it is most eloquently and convincingly expressed by Russian-born historians.

Listen, for example, to Tiber Szamuely. For centuries, "Most incomprehensible and alien of all, pervading and coloring every Western description of Russia, was the awesome sway of an omnipotent State exercising unlimited control over the persons, the property, and the very thoughts of its subjects" -- and the faithful servants of the monarchs of absolutist Europe were among those who felt this to be a phenomenon beyond their experience. There is a basic fact that today has been largely forgotten or passed in silence: "every country of modern Europe either was at one time a province of the Roman Empire or received its religion from Rome. Russia is the sole exception. It is the only country of geographical Europe that owed virtually nothing to the common cultural and spiritual heritage of the West."

Russia's history was one of aggression to acquire new territory and, more often than not, a related struggle against invaders, that for length, intensity, and ferocity has no parallel in the annals of any other nation. This was Russia for a thousand years. The cruel, relentless struggle never abated. It was "the fierce struggle of a nation placed on the frontier between Europe and Asia, on the great dividing line between settled and nomadic society, between Christian, Moslem, and Pagan." This struggle, combining national purpose, moral fervour, aggression, self-defense, and everyday struggle for a bare existence was the driving force behind the Russian

people's travail. It was a permanent part of her life for most of her history.

This was a national experience and a national existence radically different from that of the West. It created a social and political system, a national character, a mentality, a way of life utterly dissimilar to the patterns evolved in Western and Central Europe. A state of never ending war gave their society its distinctive form.

In Russia, military service was obligatory and permanent. In wartime, each and all were compelled to go to war -- "and wartime was all the time." To gain an idea of the colossal effort, compare it with medieval military practice in Europe. At the battle of Crecy in 1346, the King of France commanded the largest army yet seen in feudal Europe -- 12,000, and the force of the First and greatest Crusade numbered 25 - 30,000. And these campaigns were "short-lived spurts of energy that left their begetters utterly exhausted." Yet, from the 1300s, Russia raised and maintained a permanent armed force of 65,000 men. Russia, with a much smaller population than France, maintained its huge army not just for an isolated campaign but for 300 unbroken years, while at the same time conducting an endless series of wars against more highly developed Western neighbors and also colonizing a continent. The result was the rise of a political system "based on the unquestioning obedience and unlimited submission of the subjects; on the



principle of the obligations owed by each and every subject to the State, on the impressment into the State's service of all the creative forces of the nation, and on the sacrifice of private interest to the State's demand.

The Messianic Communism we see in the Soviet Union is not unrelated to the centuries-old identification of Russia with Orthodox Christianity, its cause with the cause of God, its State power with the power of God. The State and the faith became one. In 1510, this found expression in a monk's address to the Tsar: "All Christian Empires have converged into thy single one; two Romes have fallen, but the third stands and no fourth can ever be. Thy Empire shall fall to no one." This became the "Russian idea" -- dismissed over succeeding centuries by Western Statesmen and journalists as hypocritical mumbo jumbo. Yet, the conviction that Russia occupied a special place in the world permeated every segment of the Russian people -- the ultimate vindication of an otherwise unbearable social and political system: The idea lives on today.

Over the centuries, up to the present time, the Russian idea developed into an exotic amalgam of emotions that struck vibrantly upon the high-strung chords of the Russian soul: a "deep national feeling, a sense of belonging to a nation set apart from others by its own history; ... the conviction that the individuals' duty toward the State ... transcended all

other obligations ...; the idea that collectivism ... was nobler than individualism; that idealism and other worldliness were inherent in the Russian national (spirit) in contrast to the gross materialism of the Western scheme of values; ... consciousness, to the point of exaggeration, of the profound difference between Russia and the West; the Messianic fervor that imbued the 'Russian idea,' the conviction that the Russian nation was entrusted with the mission of sharing with others the revelation of unity and of true freedom which had been vouchsafed to them alone, and of redeeming the world from the bonds of individualism and materialism." And yet, for centuries, Westerners have worked to convince themselves that this was a State like any other, a people like themselves, with a set of values like their own. And this despite countless callous acts such as the recent hostage situations, the shootdown of civilian airliners, and the daily treatment of their own people.

A final note on the nature of our adversary and its view of the West. Much has been made in recent years about technology transfer to the USSR. Yet, industry and technology were transplanted early on from the West to Russia, beginning with Italian architecture in the 14th Century and carried forward by Peter the Great. Imagine, if you will, the sight of the great nearly seven-foot tall Tsar touring and working as a laborer in Western Europe in the late 17th century to learn the ways of the West, to hire Western technicians and craftsmen and to

acquire whole industries and technologies and factories -- which he would bring back to Russia to begin to modernize that backward State. And, this artificial creation was forced upon an unwilling nation by Peter to overcome its military weakness. The very act of modernizing Russia -- of establishing and exploiting contacts with the West -- from the beginning was to make Russia a great military power. Did Peter intend that Westernization accompany modernization? He once told a companion, "We shall need Europe for a few decades, and then we can turn our backside to her." The sentiment was more honest than it was to be accurate.

It is this unique State which we now confront -- a State and a culture shaped by a thousand years of constant war, sacrifice, and the conviction that Russia's destiny is to establish a new world order. And still many question if they can sustain their defense effort.

Will Durant once calculated that in the last 3,400 years of recorded history, only 268 have seen no war. The monumental conflicts I described at the outset were those between the emerging civilizations of the West with one concept of the relationship between an individual and the State, and the despotisms of the East with a fundamentally different view. When those Western civilizations grew tired or lost their will, or for whatever reason let down their guard, destruction followed. Edward Gibbon's words in The Decline and Fall of the

Roman Empire still seem relevant today: "The Romans were ignorant of the extent of their danger and the number of their enemies. Beyond the Rhine and the Danube, the Northern countries of Europe and Asia were filled with innumerable tribes of hunters and shepherds, poor, voracious and turbulent; bold in arms and impatient to ravage the fruits of industry .... The endless column of barbarians pressed on the Roman Empire with accumulated weight."

A thousand years of Russian history -- reinforced by Marxism-Leninism -- tell the Soviet leadership that conflict is inevitable, that the contest for supremacy is unending, that one side will win and the other will lose, and that destiny or God or the forces of history will ensure Russia's victory.

President Kennedy some 25 years ago observed that we were involved in along twilight struggle. We have now been in that struggle for just 40 years. Compare that, if you will, with the centuries of struggle between Rome and the barbarians, the two and a half century struggle between Europe and the Tatar horde, and the 200 year struggle against the Ottomans. It is a long struggle that stretches before us and the Russians are banking on the fact that we lack the will to sustain the competition.

As a final thought, therefore, I would suggest to you that the chief threat posed by the Soviet Union is not necessarily

in the vastness of its military forces -- though vast they are, but in its despotic ideology and, like the barbarians facing Rome, in the relentlessness of their assault. The question of inestimable historical importance as we consider our national priorities, examine our defense needs and our foreign commitments, and strive to counter the Soviet ideological and strategic threat is whether we will remember the origin and nature of the contest, and the lessons of history: that the whole historical experience and ideology of our adversary teaches him that conflict is constant and inevitable; and that eventual victory in the competition is Russia's destiny and the justification for its centuries of hardship and sacrifice. It is our job in intelligence to remind our leaders of these historical realities.

Despite our fondest hopes to fulfill Isaiah's prophesy, all of human history -- and especially all of Russian history -- points to our need and the need of our children and their children for swords as well as plowshares. It is not a forecast of an altogether felicitous future -- but it is a forecast of a free one. And American intelligence must and will play a central role in keeping it free.